TEN TIPS EDDIE VAN HALEN

MANY GUITARISTS WHO WERE ACTIVE IN

the late ’70s remember exactly where they were standing when they first heard Van Halen. Like film footage of an erupting volcano, the band’s eponymous 1978 debut captured in real time a stunningly explosive and organic spectacle—four hard-rocking, hard-partying adrenaline junkies whose sound was so powerful and unified, it fueled one of the most spectacular ascents in rock and roll history. After becoming kings of the suburban L.A. backyard keg party scene, Van Halen rose to playing clubs on the Sunset Strip to selling over 3,000 tickets at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium— without an album or management— to getting signed by Warner Bros. to selling over 50 million albums in the U.S. alone. And at every turn, the band’s sound launched from an astounding re-imagining of the guitar’s role in hard rock courtesy of Dutch-born musical wunderkind Edward Lodewijk Van Halen.

When Journey’s Neal Schon slapped a copy of Van Halen on a turntable in 1978, he found himself, for the first time ever, “stumped” while trying to figure out what another guitar player was doing. Later that year, Van Halen—featuring singer David Lee Roth, bassist Michael Anthony, drummer Alex Van Halen, and, of course, Alex’s younger brother Eddie—would open for Journey on a U.S. tour. “It was like getting your ass kicked every night by the best sword-swinging sushi chef in the land,” Schon recalled humbly of having EVH on the bill. “Ronnie Montrose was supporting, and he hated being in the middle slot. I would tell him, ‘Man, I’m glad you have to follow that and not me!’”

Joe Perry openly confesses that he, too, “felt the heat” when the hotshot from Pasadena hit the touring scene. “He was single-handedly moving guitar to a whole new level,” reflected the Aerosmith kingpin decades later. “We were the preeminent stadium headliners, and here were these young upstarts, ready to fill our shoes. What was amazing about Eddie’s playing was that it was full of stuff I’d heard before, yet it all sounded so new. For instance, that tape echo sound [at the end of “Eruption”] was such an old trick that I never would have done it. But Eddie was from the next generation, and everything was new to him. And he was playing to a whole new batch of kids that didn’t grow up with that stuff, so it was very smart for him to use tricks like that on top of his naturally brilliant playing. Suddenly there was this whole West Coast guitarslinger movement that he started.”

That movement started with a kid in his basement bucking nearly every guitar trend imaginable by building his own hybrid guitars, pushing blues rock to molten temperatures and supersonic speeds, evolving revolutionary rock guitar techniques, and forging the most exhilarating and inspirational electric guitar sound this side of Hendrix. That kid was and is Edward Van Halen. But, before we let you in on the secrets of his cleverest tricks and most influential licks, first you gotta …

1.D.I.Y.!

The irony shouldn’t be lost on anyone that, at $25K retail each, the recent run of EVH Frankenstein Replica guitars commanded what would seem to people in most tax brackets absurdly tall stacks of cash for clones of a mutt instrument built from scraps. That mutt, of course, is the beloved beater guitar Van Halen has referred to using such humble terms as “my red-striped garbage Strat” and the “piece of sh*t.” Nonetheless, the pricey Replicas sold, because they play, feel, and sound exactly like the greasy candy cane on which Van Halen wrote and recorded his most influential riffs. From the cigarette burns to the 1971 quarter once used as a bridge stop to exacting electrical specs, each Replica contains much of the mojo of its forebear. But whether you build your own

Frankenstrat or use one of Van Halen's Ernie Ball Music Man, Peavey, Charvel, or EVH signature models, take inspiration from his daring doit- yourself life mission.

"I hate store-bought, off the rack guitars. They don't do what I want them to do, which is kick ass and scream," Van Halen told GP in 1978. He admitted he had ruined a vintage Les Paul, an ES-335, and other guitars in his quest to build the ultimate rock weapon. Crudely routing a Strat-shaped ash body from Charvel to accommodate a dual-coil pickup, Van Halen added an unfinished birdseye maple neck, hardware from a '58 Strat, and a hard-mounted Gibson P.A.F. humbucker that was custom wound, potted in wax (to mute coil squeal at high volumes), and angled so the outermost pole pieces lined up with the outside strings. Armed with Schwinn bicycle lacquer, EVH spray-painted the body black, striped it with tape, painted it white, and removed the tape. Voilà—hard rock's most famous guitar was born for about $150 in Carter-era cash. (The red coat came later.) Because it looked so damn cool; coupled the girthful tone of a Les Paul with the expressiveness, vibrato system, and raw snarl of a Stratocaster; and was featured on Van Halen, imitations of the guitar became so ubiquitous that EVH at one point had a lawsuit pending against the very company that built his guitar's body.

2.JUST CRANK 'EM ALL CLOCKWISE

For years, there was more than a little mystery surrounding EVH's stunning tone. Some of the confusion was due in part to the guitarist being less than completely forthcoming about his rig, mostly because his bandmates—ever protective of their golden goose—urged him not to completely reveal his signal path. While he initially threw imitators off his trail with hints of secret amp mods and boosted transformer voltages, subsequent interviews revealed that the famous Marshall head that powered the classic David Lee Roth-era Van Halen albums was entirely stock—though typically biased hot enough to melt its Sylvania EL34 power tubes at least once a week. The one tonetweaker practice EVH engaged in regularly was lowering his amp's transformer voltage to about 90 volts via a Variac. Today, EVH gets his sizzle from his signature 6L6-powered EVH 5150 III heads. During much of Van Halen's Sammy Hagar-fronted era, EVH used his screamin' line of Peavey 5150s, which he developed with amp guru James Brown. But if you're obsessed with attaining the classic Van Halen "brown sound," plug into Dunlop/ MXR EVH Flanger and EVH Phase 90 stompboxes ("The Phase 90 doesn't really phase [that strongly], it just kind of gives you a treble boost, which helps solos cut through," says Ed) and then into a tape delay set for one tasty 100- to 150-millisecond repeat. Last but not least, you'll of course need a voltage-starved (thanks, Variac!), late- '60s 100-watt Marshall Super Lead. Crank every knob all the way up while driving a 4x12 cabinet close miked with two Shure SM57s—one angled off-axis for extra bottom. (Tip: For a touch of the 2009 Van Halen sound, add a Dunlop EVH Wah Wah pedal.) Want the dive bomb effect at the end of "Eruption"? Consider customizing a vintage Univox EC 80 tape delay, as Van Halen did, with a motor that cycles slowly enough to drop a looped note a full octave in pitch. Lastly, for the classic Van Halen visual, mount the Univox in the hull of a World War II-era practice bomb, as spied in this feature's opening photo.

3.CRASH THE CAR

Being that EVH likes to use the vibrato bar to "break things up" in his solos, let's make sure you're at peace with bar dips and dives both subtle and extreme. Van Halen has said that his playing is "like a race car racing down the road and then crashing every now and then." The famous "crashes" were often created using the '58 Strat vibrato system he had installed on his Frankenstein guitar. "The bar is actually like another instrument," says EVH. "You can't just jerk the thing and expect it to stay in tune. If you bring the bar down, the G and the B string go sharp when you release it. You gotta stretch those strings back with a

quick little jerk.” Of course, when Floyd Rose’s revolutionary locking tremolo system became available, EVH became as great an endorsee for that product as Michael Jordan would be for Nike hightops. Often, though, when it came time to record, Van Halen preferred the slightly fuller sound of his ’58 Fender hardware.

4.CHEAT

Whether it’s generating elephant noises by scraping the pick up the string until the string clangs against the pickup’s pole piece (“Intruder”), producing menacing swoosh noises by grinding on the trem springs with a flanger engaged (“And the Cradle Will Rock…”), generating flutey sixteenth- note patterns by playing eighth-note volume-knob swells while using a dottedeighth delay setting (“Cathedral,” transcribed in the January ’06 GP), stringing together standard harmonics to generate kaleidoscopic melodic ascents (Examples 1a and 1b, à la “Somebody Get Me a Doctor” and “I’m the One,” respectively), or cranking a Wurlitzer through a Marshall (“Cradle”), EVH has always displayed an uncanny knack for finding simple ways of generating complex and Mammoth sounds. (Yep—a pun for you, Van Halen historians.) “The best thing I do is cheat,” said Van Halen in reference to his faux-Carlos Montoya classical playing on “Little Guitars (Intro).” Instead of learning to play flamenco, he got a polytimbral, Montoya-like sound by tremolo picking the high strings while hammering a bass line on the low strings. “If there’s something that I want to do, I won’t give up until I can figure out some way to make it sound similar to what I really can’t do.” (Don’t worry, Ed, we understand what you meant by that!)

5.ROCK IT LIKE YOU TALK IT

No riff projects Van Halen’s supremely cocky “I’m gonna fu*k your girlfriend” swagger (yes, Roth often halted the band mid-song to deliver this taunt) more effectively than the merciless “Unchained” intro [Ex. 2]. (Note: Though all the examples in this feature are notated at standard pitch, Van Halen typically tunes all strings down one-half or even three-quarters of a step.) Composed on piano and full of bright major and sus4 harmonies reminiscent of Keith Richards’ mini-chords on “Brown Sugar,” the tone and phrasing of “Unchained” radiates arrogance backed by conspicuous lethality— especially during the foreboding drubbing of the open, detuned sixth string (which is dropped an extra whole-step for this song). Like the rumble of advancing tanks, the lick’s cruel timbres signal the meek that no, they in fact won’t be inheriting the Earth after all. (Tip: Kick on an MXR EVH Flanger between chords to get those trademark Van Halen swooshes.)

Of course, the roguish Van Halen attack also has elements of sophistication and humor, and in no way requires that you or your singer rock assless chaps à la the band’s lion-maned, kickboxing frontman. At its best, it delivers its ass kickings in clever ways, and always with a smile. To achieve VH’s snarky mojo while playing “Unchained,” channel the witty side of DLR by thinking of the time he said of Van Halen haters in the press, “Rock music critics like Elvis Costello because rock music critics look like Elvis Costello.”

6.HOT-ROD THE BLUES

The biggest mistake many glammed-out ’80s Van Halen wannabes made (besides not seeing hurricane Nirvana coming to destroy them in ’91) was to underestimate the influence the blues had on EVH. “I know every fu*kin’ solo Clapton ever played, note for note,” Van Halen was wont to say. Never one to practice scales, the closest thing EVH does to a scale run is blaze through Ex. 3a, the sort of three-notes-per-string ascent you may spy on “I’m the One” and

“Jump.” Nor did Van Halen ever practice arpeggios, though the single-string Eadd9 arp he takes to skies with on his brain-freezing “Ice Cream Man” break (à la Ex. 3b) makes for a nice harmonic etude. (Tip: Loop it, then play the move one time each on the second, third, and fourth strings.)

The miraculous thing is that when you slow down the turbo shuffle riff that opens “I’m the One,” you discover it’s just a basic 12/8 blues theme, like Ex. 3c, but played at utterly relativistic speeds. Warping the space/time continuum, EVH lived more in the three-plus-minutes it took to track this light-speed guitar tour de force than most rock guitarists live in their entire careers. Slow down classic Van Halen solos, and you discover that many of them, despite their wildly inventive sound, reside in the world’s go-to blues box (presented in the key of E in Ex. 3d). The sparks really fly when Van Halen bends the 7 on the second string a whopping major third or more, as in Ex. 3e (à la the “Atomic Punk” solo). To get this patented EVH string wringing down, be sure to also wrangle Ex. 3f—which, up a fourth in the key of A (at the seventeenth position) is a phrase inspired the extreme second string torture on the solo to “You Really Got Me.” The perfect-fourth bend on beat four of the third bar will again test the tensile strength of your B string. (Note: For better tone and zero string sag during bends, Van Halen’s bridge is not floating, but pulled solidly against the body via three taught trem springs. His .009-.040-gauge strings surrender tension only when the bar is pressed.)

7.TAP INTO THE DIVINE

Watching Jimmy Page play his famous “Heartbreaker” triplet pull-offs to the open third string at a Zeppelin concert around ’71, Van Halen realized he could do similar triplet moves all over the neck if he simply put both hands on the fretboard. Thus, “tapping,” his most famous and widely imitated technique, was born, though other players were likely experimenting with similar approaches at the same time. These included Harvey Mandel, Brian May, Billy Gibbons, and Steve Hackett, who tracked the first known incarnations of tapped triplets on Genesis’ 1971 album Nursery Cryme. At its wildest (think “Jump,” “Hot for Teacher,” and Michael Jackson’s “Beat It”), EVH tapping agilely hops from string to string. However, the best way to learn it is by stealing simple single-string shapes from the baroque tap cadenza that closes “Eruption.” Or, even better, grok the tapping gateway lick in Ex. 4. You gotta get this down, because it’s the type of move Van Halen uses on both “You Really Got Me” and “I’m the One.” Dig: As the fretting hand descends chromatically from the fifth to the second positions, all the notes combine to effect a classic Delta-style turnaround harmony. (Again, the blues.)

8.OWN THE OVERTONES

With his intros to “Women In Love,” “Spanish Fly,” and “Girl Gone Bad”—the shimmering textures that inspired Ex. 5a—Van Halen also got the world to fall in love with tapped octave harmonics. These chimey partials are achieved by bouncing a picking-hand fingertip against the string right over the fret residing one octave (12 frets) above the note held by the fretting hand (or nut, if it’s an open string). In his live cadenzas, Van Halen regularly taps deeper into the overtone series using moves like Ex. 5b. Here, as fretted notes remain stationary, the tapping finger sounds prismatic third and fifth harmonics by striking other harmonic nodes besides the octave node. And, if you’d like to play the most evolved tappedharmonic lick the world has ever known, plant your fretting hand at the fifth position, and watch your back. It’s time to take a walk down “Mean Street” [Ex. 5c], off VH’s tenebrous, if underrated, masterpiece, Fair Warning.

9.NAIL THAT “ONE” MOVE

Ah, the Internet—rich with wondrous nuggets of knowledge, to be sure, but also rife with computer viruses, identity theft schemes, and, most pernicious of all, bad tablature. One seemingly inscrutable bit of Van Halen code that baffles many a lick hacker is Ex. 6. Employed most dramatically on the opening of his second "I'm the One" solo, but also tagged briefly on "Somebody Get Me a Doctor," this looped, five-note endorphin rush is simple to play once you understand the quintuplet's ingenious combination of picked notes, slurred notes, and open strings. (Note: EVH doesn't necessarily loop the grouping in the strict quintuplets presented here, but keeps the phrasing loose and hemiolic.) Dial it in. You're gonna need this move when you're finally ready to …

10.ERUPT!

It's funny that Eddie Van Halen has had to defend the presence of instrumentals on his albums over the years. If producer Ted Templeman had not insisted the guitarist include his 1978 backstage warm-up routine on the band's debut, the world would be without the hard rock guitar cadenza against which all others are measured: "Eruption." If you can fire off even a few of the fretboard pyrotechnics he uses in this white-hot guitar fireworks display, you'll surely elicit some oohs and ahs. Showing the opening seconds of "Eruption," Ex. 7a has almost no bar lines and no time signature, as those things would only be confusing. Now, remember Ex. 6? Dig its reappearance two frets down, in the fifth position (in the repeating bar) of Ex. 7a. Own this move, as well as Ex. 7b—the near-identical sonic fusillade that occurs one string group down at about the 0:08 mark—and you've nailed the trickiest parts of the first "Eruption" movement. Next, land Ex. 7c, and you've reeled in the trickiest part of the final movement. The lesson from these three excerpts is simple: Cheating by using open strings in sly ways can yield spectacularly fast, fun phrases.

"I don't know where the ideas come from," says Van Halen. "People ask me, 'What were you thinking when you came up with this or that?' I wasn't thinking anything. Not to get too deep on you, but I'm just some sort of vehicle; a connection to something. Any creative artist who thinks they're responsible [for what they create] can kiss my ass, because they're not."

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